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ABSTRACT

One intention that an instructor had for her new course called "Writing and Healing: Women's Journal Writing" was to make apparent the power of self-written text to transform the writer. She asked her students--women studying women writing their lives and women writing their own lives--to write three pages a day and to focus on change. The instructor participated in the daily writing because she wanted, in particular, to heal her own writing, intending to remove as many neurotic obstacles as she possibly could from the doing of her own writing. After reading Anne Frank, the class would move on to Virginia Woolf, and to Audre Lorde's Cancer Journals, with the intention of beginning a discussion on the history of journal writing and its theorists to eventually include a collection of essays on writing and healing. But, after September 11, 2001, even academia's ivory tower trembled. The fear in the classroom caused by the terrorist attacks had to be addressed because fear had suddenly become part of the syllabus: "fear across the curriculum." The classroom narrative underwent changes in understanding and in endurance, as had their journal writing. Some of those who had stopped writing in their healing journals began to write for the silenced women of Afghanistan and the absence of the Twin Towers. Students responded to other students in their writing, they remembered the writing issues of each student, and they mentioned what they had gleaned from the readings. Women's journal writing pedagogy provides the context that recognizes the community that continues past the classroom. (NKA)

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"Transformation and Text: Journal Pedagogy"

ED 464 328

Every class begins with intentions. The students intend to learn; the teacher intends learning to occur; the classroom is intended to be a learning space. One of my intentions for my new course called "Writing and Healing: Women's Journal Writing," that I would be teaching in fall semester 2001, was to make apparent the power of self-written text to transform the writer. What happens to us when we keep a daily journal? How does writing empower the writer to make necessary changes in her life? We are a class of women studying women writing their lives and writing our own lives to intend transformation. I ask them for 3 written pages a day; I ask for a focus on change -- a new ability to create and inhabit, as did Virginia Woolf and Anne Frank, our own rooms. We enter the texts of ourselves the way we enter our rooms -- this room is mine as this text is mine. I write in my journal, and my relationship to what I write about changes. I asked this class to choose something they wanted to write about in themselves and to focus their writing in their daily journals about the journey they would take by writing, a different journey than if they were not writing. Itself a journey, we journal other kinds of journeys into being. The action of writing would address the action of living, and the relationship between the two could cause healing. I would participate in the daily writing because I wanted, in particular, to heal my own writing, which means that I intended to remove as many neurotic obstacles as I possibly could from the doing of my own writing.

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The class has its first meeting. We are four graduate students and four undergraduates and the usual Southern California mix of cultures. One of my concerns on the first day of class is that the students understand that I am not trained in therapy; my Ph.D. in English trains me to analyze written texts, not engage in healing the broken. If anyone would engage them in healing, it would be the texts themselves, not I. I wanted distance. My pedagogy wanted the connection made between writing and healing, academic community and healing, and not teacher and healing. I wanted journaling as genre to be the transformative device. I talked to the class about the power one gains from being able to name and claim experience, a continuing issue in women's studies. That my experience is my identity points to the transformative efforts of being the one who can find the words, the one who names. We talked about the orderly actions of writing creating order itself, if only for a moment, in the disorder of our lives. We talked of the way writing surprises us, takes on a life of its own to reveal things about our own lives; it is not uncommon to hear in a writing class that the writer was surprised by the writing, by where the writing went and what it found there. What writing finds is the writer. The storyteller is the story. But because the personal stories we tell are also political stories, the storyteller is always more than one story. To recognize that we are multiple stories is to enter into cultural healing. The tyranny of one story is terrorism, whereas cultural healing allows multiple stories, a classroom condition that invites community. On this first day of class that met once a week, we began a conversation on how we were going to define the terms that would define us. What is healing? What is writing? As these are processes, so learning about using them is a process. We assumed we would learn; we assumed we might change. We talked about who we wanted to be at semester's end,

stronger, we said, braver, happier. The things we always want to be. O.K., I admonished, your job now is to get in the habit of writing in a journal every day. What do you want to write about yourself? Where do you want to go?

After reading Anne Frank, we would move to Virginia Woolf, because I wanted to give them a sense of those whose publications initiated a new interest in journal writing in the 20th Century. Our move to Audre Lorde's Cancer Journals would let us look at the body and the space it takes to become a page. For the class next week, they had to be ready to talk about the effects of a week's worth of journal entries, and I intended to begin a discussion about the history of journal writing and its theorists that would eventually include the collection of essays on writing and healing published by the NCTE. Writing is an action that cuts into our self-direction and can re-direct our stance. If we are writing we become our writing, the way Virginia Woolf became her texts and lived as them, then died at their end, the way Anne Frank's best friend in the secret annex really was Kitty – the name she gave her writing. We have all written to Kitty; we have all written to our writing. I wanted my students to enter their writing lives. I would not read their journals because I wanted them to connect writing and freedom. They would write papers about journal writing and would include their own journal writing in their papers and in class conversations. I gave them the syllabus. The first paper asked them to observe and discuss the relationship between journal writing and healing. I wanted them to think about the power of writing upon the writer. Their second paper would be about their understanding of cultural healing. The last paper would be an overview of their journal writing – after three months of writing, what happened to them? What happened to their

writing? What effects did writing cause? There would be no exams. They would read their papers aloud in class and we would discuss the issues raised, their place in history and culture, and the kind of writing that happened as a result. How would we be transformed by writing and how would our writing transform? Because every writing class adores change and is built on the premise of rewriting, by transforming our writing we might also transform our lives. The class went the full three hours; we said good night and went out into our writing.

The second class meeting was the day after September 11. Everything had changed and nothing had changed. We sat in class with the faces of people who had seen too much bad news. Because life goes on I was still the teacher and expected to make sense, explain, assess, because I was still the teacher I said that the sign a student had pinned to her t-shirt "No war" was her journal entry while I talked about Vietnam and the signs we carried and thought about how young I had been. As the United States was changed by the disaster of the Vietnam War, so it was changed by the disaster of September 11. Here is a prime example of academia's relationship to the street, when the street changes so violently even academia's ivory tower trembles. When the tower trembles, the classroom changes; pedagogy is challenged to respond to what students bring to the classroom -- not only assigned texts, but the texts of their lives. The fear in the classroom caused by the terrorist attacks had to be addressed because this fear had suddenly become part of the syllabus, a part of everyone's syllabus: fear across the curriculum. I felt overwhelmed. At that second class they looked not at each other but at me, what should I do to take this group of people and make them into a class? We had been transformed by terror. I

thought about the social edit to go on with our normal lives as a response to chaos, to find structure in everyday rhythms. We talked about journal writing as being an everyday rhythm. How do we heal from this, I heard myself ask the class, that had begun with personal voice developing into personal answer.

How do we heal this? I asked the class, attempting to create community and action, in a roomful of sorrowful stares. No answers except mumbles and sighs. I had to talk them back into the class, tell them that academic community mattered. We had to go on being a class. Unwillingly I had become the healer and wanted to mandate healing. I tried to subdue the grand scale of terrorism by aligning cultural terrorism with personal terrorism, the stories that we tell ourselves to keep ourselves frightened and off-balance, attacking ourselves in waves of self-criticism and grief. The class began a conversation about the ways we terrorize ourselves. I gave an example of my own self-terrorism: The ways I intimidate myself before I start a writing project, the names I call myself, until I am well-flagellated and can begin to write. We went around the room telling our stories. The students were talking, but could I get them back to writing? Writing is an issue in any class. It is an academic tradition to think of writing as having power. The power of writing over the writer is a part of the writing process. As writers shape texts, so texts shape writers. To be shaped by a text we have written is to empower ourselves by writing ourselves into being who we are. This being on the page, this becoming of writer by writing is analogous to the student discovered by learning, and the teacher who becomes the teaching. The classroom is also a page where the transformation of course to class happens. Journal writing entices and values individual voice. That is the continuous

gesture in keeping a journal: that I can become what I am writing. How fascinating to be teaching a class whose agenda was also the national agenda: To heal. Confronted by a need for meaning, understanding, explanation, the nation began to heal through patriotism. Love of country overwhelmed me. Personal issues entwined with public issues, and some of those who had stopped writing in their healing journals began to write again for the silenced women of Afghanistan and the absence of The Twin Towers. They began to write about the many kinds of veils that women wear, the burkas of silence that each page of writing releases. One woman student in the class, who suffered from constant migraine headaches that regularly incapacitated her, saw her migraines as burkas of illness within which she could kill herself. She saw the text her body was writing, and she tried through her journal writing, to interrupt. Writing continues to surprise us with its magic, but we have to write in order to experience what magic occurs. The journal is a genre that intends to transform the writer. As the writer finds the journal a place, even carrying the place around, the space around, so also is the classroom a particular kind of space. Writing that intends to invite healing, pedagogy that intends to invite change, become similar places of learning, spaces that mirror each other. It always surprises a new journal writer and reminds an experienced one that writing has the power to transform writer, reader, and itself. As a good class will not be the same as when it began, so will a good journal text change itself to meet life's challenges and a good writer will be changed by her texts. The continuous journey of writing, if we are writing, keeps us on the road, moving from place to place in one place, the journal. A good class also keeps us on the road and its place becomes a safe place in which to journey together, as one student said of my class: She will miss the sanity, freedom, and understanding in this

gathering of women – something usually said in any gathering of women: We are free to be women, to experience the many definitions of her – and that is yet another subtext, another action, in any class of women students studying women's writing. We became a community and joined a larger community, the work we did in the classroom of working together so that individuals could understand themselves, made us able to better understand what it meant to be both a community of women and a community of writers.

The classroom narrative had undergone changes in understanding and in endurance as had their journal writing. It had become important that our weekly 3-hour seminar seemed to have become a part of our writing. The students responded to other students in their writing, they remembered the writing issues of each student and they mentioned what they had gleaned from the readings. What power did writing bring to the room? As much as the class changed, the course remained on task throughout the semester. I wanted to maintain the stability of my original intentions; everything went back to the power of text. What scripts were we writing ourselves into? What conversations were we having with ourselves? If need be, how could we change those conversations into conversations of empowerment. When I read their final papers about what they saw happening in their semester-long journals, I saw some of the results of journal writing for the class. One student wrote about struggling with her relationship to the space that writing creates, and also equally struggling with the space that any relationship creates. Someone else wrote: "I am writing. Writing keeps me mentally healthy. I stop writing when I become clinically depressed; the depression keeps me from writing; the lack of writing keeps me depressed." I read their final papers and saw that the course and class

had withstood the accusations by my colleagues of "touchy-feely" – a phrase used to denigrate many a women's studies course and any personal writing class. Their personal journals had fused writing and life, and they used each to assert the other. In the middle of writing this paper on pedagogy, I was in a violent car accident, as I healed I was interested to see that one of the first things I tested was my ability to write, writing continued to be such an indication of life. If I am writing, then I am well, as Virginia Woolf thought. We were all writing. We were at least well enough to be writing. Journal writing lets us remain separate from history and culture as much as we reflect it. We survive because of distance as much as we survive because of connection. Journal writing gives us another place to be, another place to go. There, we are what we are writing. In a journal writing class, pedagogy communicates language identity, creates and studies the first draft. Technology is obliterating the first draft as a piece of writing to save; one of the places it is saved is in journal writing. Saved also are the daily lives we never talk about, the thoughts we forget, and our connections to society as we open doors to get to the page itself. Since language is a reflection of history and culture, our words are us. The class talked about women's words and how they exist in a world now sadly again dominated by war. Many of our words have come a long way, others are babies. One of the students was in a college play and gave a stirring rendition in class of a monologue from The Vagina Monologues, much to the distress of the political science class next door. Journal writing pedagogy asks us to inhabit our writing, as we inhabit reading, as we inhabit our own bodies.

Because journal writing is so powerful in its effects on people, scientists write about its impact on arthritis, depression, any recovery, it is a powerful experience to teach a journal writing course. The power of the close in journal writing puts pedagogy in a constant struggle to evaluate distance. In evaluating distance, we evaluate the voice, tone, language of the first draft. How close is this draft to what I really want to say? Who am I as I say it? How close can we come to ourselves before we lose ourselves forever? By teaching this course, I taught myself that writing is ceremony. As much as a lit candle, a dance around fire, a prayer, writing acknowledges and recognizes the act of writing, the act of creating the writer. Journal writing is where we write for ourselves and in doing so discover who we are. It is this discovery that heals us or destroys us. Women's journal writing pedagogy provides the context that recognizes the community that continues past the classroom. After the last class, the students went out dancing and their dancing was what journal writing had done.